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Forget children, self-regulating ads only helps the food industry

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Abstract
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Forget children, self-regulating ads only helps the food industry

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The food industry’s commitment to actually reducing inappropriate food marketing to children is called into question by a paper published today in the open-access journal PLOS ONE.

Couple this with research published last week showing drinking soft drinks makes children aggressive, and you won’t be alone in thinking it’s time to do something about how junk food and kids mix.

But what about the measures already in place? And do these US studies actually have lessons for other countries like Australia?

Food advertising to children

The PLOS study examined television advertisements for fast-food restaurants broadcast on US national television between July 2009 and June 2010.

The bulk of the child-targeted advertisements (62 of the 95) were for McDonald’s, with 30 from Burger King, and three from Subway.

Compared to 92 matching adult-targeted advertisements, Burger King and McDonald’s child-targeted ads were more likely to show food packaging (88% versus 23%) and street views of the restaurants (41% versus 12%). This indicates the importance placed by marketers on conveying branding to children.

The massive power of branding was also clearly demonstrated in a 2007 study that found children preferred the taste of food and drinks when they were presented in McDonald’s...
wrappers.

Across the two chains, 69% of child-targeted advertisements featured a toy premium or giveaway (compared to 1% of adult-targeted ads); and 55% (compared to 14%) featured film tie-ins.

Not surprisingly, the authors concluded that fast food advertisements aimed at children did not emphasise food, focusing instead on toys, premiums and tie-ins. They also concluded that these companies had not followed through on the letter or the spirit of industry self-regulatory codes.

The picture in Australia

When Australian researchers examined the impact of self-regulation in a 2011 study, they found it didn’t reduce fast food advertising to children.

And in case you are persuaded by industry arguments that self-regulation is effective, a recent systematic review also concluded that scientific, peer-reviewed studies find self-regulation of food advertising has been ineffective. It also found that industry-sponsored reports find high compliance with these voluntary codes.

The use of film tie-ins and media characters in adverts is controversial, and there’s evidence that children rate food as more tasty when there is a licenced cartoon character on the packaging.

Following advocacy by parent groups and NGOs (non-governmental organisations) regarding the extensive use of premiums to sell fast food to Australian children, the mandatory Children’s Television Standards were revised in 2009 to clarify that an advertisement:

\[
\text{must not make reference to the premium in a way that is more than merely incidental to the reference to the advertised product or service.}
\]

A review of food and beverage advertisements in five Australian cities over a two-month period in 2010 identified 619 breaches of the standards, including 120 breaches of this specific clause, and 332 breaches of the industry’s voluntary regulations.

Just like the images, advertising voice-overs in the PLOS ONE study focused on giveaways and film tie-ins. When those same chains targeted adults, they focused on taste, price, and portion size.

This concurrent targeting of children and adults with very different messages about a brand’s food products is not unique to fast food restaurants.

Our research into advertising for snack foods found that advertisements in children’s magazines focused on fun, games, “coolness” and inferences of popularity. Whereas concurrent advertisements in magazines for adults focused on nutrition and convenience.

We also found that adults perceived distinctly different messages in the two mediums and, importantly, that their intention to purchase the snack foods for their children varied depending on the version they were exposed to.

There’s more

Providing further angst for the marketers of unhealthy food and drinks, a study published last
week in the Journal of Pediatrics found that children who consume soft drinks are more likely to experience behavioural problems.

Even after controlling for a range of possible confounders (socio-demographic factors, maternal depression and family violence), the researchers found children who regularly drank even one soft drink a day were more likely to display aggressive behaviour.

Children who drank more than four soft drinks a day were twice as likely to get into fights, physically attack people, and destroy other people's property; and more likely to have attention problems.

This was not some small-scale research with a few children; it was a rigorous study conducted by experienced researchers who assessed soft drink consumption and behavioural outcomes among 2,929 five-year-olds in 20 US cities.

The authors recommended warning labels be included on soft drinks to alert parents of the risks associated with children's consumption.

Not surprisingly, the Australian Beverages Council dismissed the study's recommendations and argued that the study authors "failed to factor out other important considerations".

As would be expected, the peak body argued that mandatory regulation is not needed as the industry has been voluntarily taking steps to enable consumers to make "informed choices".

It remains to be seen whether these strategies will be any more effective than self-regulatory approaches to reducing marketing of other unhealthy food products to children. I won't be holding my breath.